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Self-portrait with mortar board: A study of academic identity using the map, the novel and the grid

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Self-portrait with mortar board: A study of academic identity using the map, the novel and the grid

This paper introduces the ‘map’, the ‘novel’ and the ‘grid’, three strategies inspired by the creative arts which potentially enrich higher education research by revealing layers of truth otherwise difficult to discern. The ‘map’ was inspired by the *Map of an Englishman*, an etching by Grayson Perry RA. It is used to create and analyse a visualisation of academic identity. The ‘novel’ depends upon finding an appropriate work of fiction to provide an analytical framework of metaphorical themes which help to draw out social and cultural issues. The ‘grid’ visually encodes the themes underlying large quantities of electronic communication to create a graphical précis of discourse at a chosen point in time. I demonstrate these strategies in an autoethnographic study of academic identity. My findings echo and enhance those of other studies into academic identity, suggesting the strategies could be helpful ways of seeing and understanding the research context.

Keywords: academic identity; autoethnography; creative arts; higher education research; research strategies

Introduction

The ‘map’, the ‘novel’ and the ‘grid’ are three ways of obtaining, presenting and analysing data inspired by the creative arts. Depending on research stance, these might be called ‘strategies’, ‘moves’ or ‘methods’. Each requires the user to make a series of decisions and enact them carefully in order to obtain insight. In this paper, I will call them ‘strategies’ and show how they potentially enrich higher education research by revealing layers of truth otherwise difficult to discern (Brew, 2001). Rather like self-portraiture, these strategies share the capacity to both distance and immerse the originator (Friend, 2005) and hence are particularly suited to use in “[c]lose-up research” (Trowler, 2012, p. 276) where one is deeply familiar with the context. They enrich the choices available for educational researchers like myself, seeking to understand the problems of our own domain. Through the ‘map’, I depict academic identity as an island in order to provide a visualisation for subsequent analysis. The effectiveness of the ‘novel’ depends upon the metaphors taken from a chosen work of fiction to create a framework for examining the social and cultural issues in a research context. The ‘grid’ offers a means of visualising the discourse underlying potentially large quantities of data, and of revealing changes in this discourse over time. In this

paper, I will demonstrate the application of these strategies to a single case with a single focus, my own academic identity, in order to uncover different “phenomena, descriptions, explanations or meaning lying beneath that surface” (Brew, 2001, p. 25). Nonetheless, the three strategies each have wide potential use because, like art, they have the power to transform the familiar “into something rich and strange” (Friend, 2005, p. 161), hence contributing a more subtle understanding. As in portraiture, the strategies one adopts will determine what is foregrounded, what is hidden and how trustworthy the results appear to others.

Academic identity provides a useful focus for this paper since it is something we each experience, no matter what our research interest might be. Academic identity concerns how we see ourselves, and how others see us, within the higher education world. It is fragmented and fluid (Henkel, 2000), evolving as aspects of past and current self are affected by the changing academic context. For example, Clouder, Deepwell and King (2009) find academic identities fragmented in response to an increasingly performative culture; while Åkerlind (2011) notes the fluidity of academic identity in becoming established in one’s field. Academic identity theory is ‘bound up’ with a range of other educational research concepts. Firstly, threshold concepts (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008; Meyer & Land, 2005) contributes the notions of troublesomeness and liminality which help to explain how one’s understanding of what it means to be an academic ebbs and flows as one learns more about the context. Smith (2010), in her study of the socialisation of probationary academics, found the negotiation of this liminal space of transition to be troublesome. Secondly, academic strategic change (Billot, 2010; Clegg, 2008) explains how an institution’s adaptations to such pressures as global competition and the marketisation of higher education alter the culture which contextualises our identity. Thirdly, Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice theory provides the notions of joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement, which together explain how our work-related groupings support or undermine the socialisation and activities that define our academic identity.

Methodological context

The three research strategies introduced in this paper are indicative of the possibilities that the creative arts can offer the diverse world of higher education research. This diversity has been recognised in studies of higher education publications by Tight (2012) and Kandlbinder (2012). Oancea (2005) suggests that educational research is conceptualised differently according to our knowledge of the field. This may explain disagreements over what an acceptable educational research method or methodology might be, and the characterisation of some educational research as “non-reliable and inconclusive” Oancea (2005, p. 167). While the case for innovative research strategies in higher education is growing (Brew 2001; Cousin, 2009), Tight (2012, p. 21) found that of the 567 articles published in 2010 that he studied, 91% used the dominant “method/ologies” multivariate analysis (44%), documentary analysis (26%) and interview (21%).

Only two articles in Tight’s (2012) study (0.3%) combined analysis at the level of the individual with an auto/biographic method/ology. Nevertheless, in this paper I analyse my own academic identity as a single case using the lens of autoethnography

(Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) which explores experiences from the inside (Cousin, 2009) while retaining a consciousness of the wider social and theoretical context. It requires introspection, honesty and a readiness to reveal one's vulnerabilities (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This is not to imply that the strategies I employ are restricted either to autoethnography or to ethnography, nor that they must be used together or in a particular order. Autoethnography begins by acknowledging that research is mediated through the researcher's values and beliefs (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I believe in a pragmatic adoption of "what works" in a given situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 2) and ask for openness to this approach, rather as Trowler (2012, p. 282) called for openness to the "different ways of seeing" that alternative research theories offer.

In this study, I am my own research subject and purposive sample, looking inwards and outwards at the same time, in ways that are "self-reflexive but not self-obsessed" (Denzin, 2006, p. 421). An individual case "is very feasible or do-able ... it can also be very in-depth and revealing" (Tight, 2012, p. 215). On what subject could I have greater authority to speak than a study of myself? What could be more authentic – or, indeed, what could be more false? The test is whether the application of these strategies creates a believable, readable text (Brew, 2001), and a convincing argument for their wider adoption. These points will be discussed once I have demonstrated each of the strategies in turn through the following vignettes.

The map

In this vignette, I introduce a visual way of exploring one's academic identity.

Inspiration

I developed the 'map' to help student-colleagues understand the concept of academic identity as part of their post-graduate module in higher education professional practice upon which I teach. To engage participants and help them explore their own developing academic identity, I looked for parallels in other spheres of life. By chance I came across an etching by the artist Grayson Perry RA called the *Map of an Englishman* illustrated in Klein (2009, p. 184-5). This artwork depicts an imaginary island divided into regions such as Dreams, Cliché and Myths where a Bleak peninsular contains Bad-Review and Misunderstood, and the countryside he calls Guru leads down to off-shore islets like World-Of-His Own. While some of the detail within this artwork might offend, it was the conception rather than the content which fascinated me.

Application

The map of my own academic identity is shown in Figure 1. I developed it in the same way that I suggested my students develop their maps; first by writing personal attributes quickly on individual sticky notes; then grouping similar attributes; and finally drawing the island image around the text and reviewing the content.

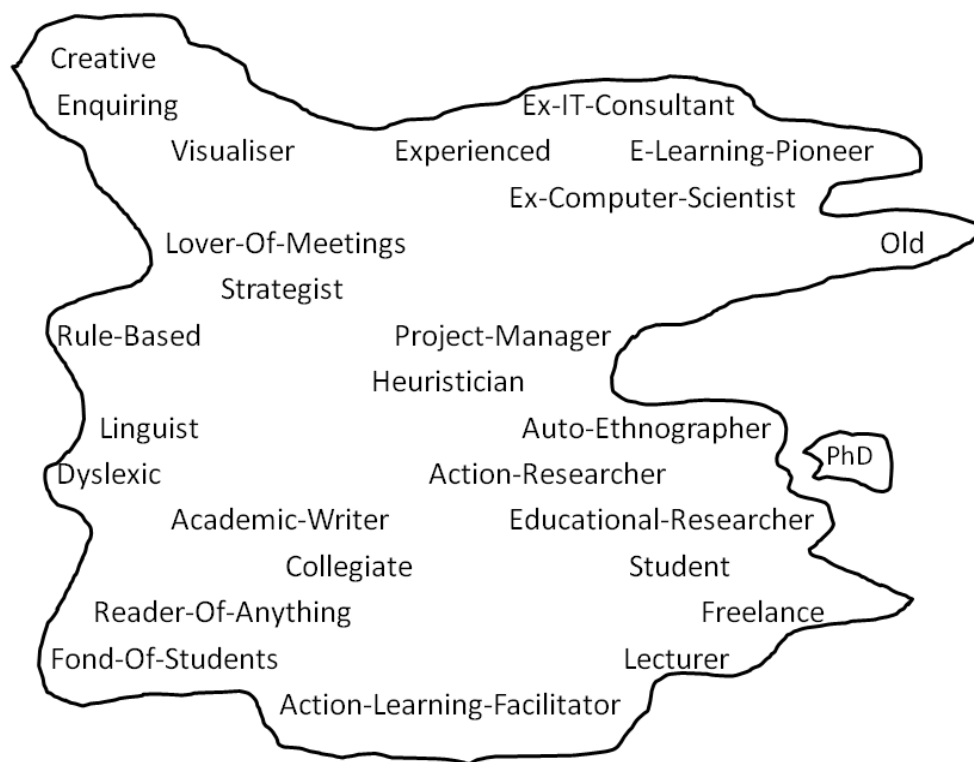


Figure 1. Map of the author's academic identity.

My map is, inevitably, idiosyncratic. Until I reflected on my particular attributes as an academic practitioner, I had not thought that being old was important. I must now acknowledge that age is significant to me. It is perhaps the first thing, apart from my gender, that people notice about me as I enter a room. Interestingly, I did not think to list my gender amongst my academic identity attributes. Thirty years ago, I would have thought of gender first and age not at all. Then, I believed that gender was society's false barrier; now, I see age in the same way. Thus, Old is located on its own island peninsula. Similarly, my freelance status differentiates me from colleagues. I am 'retired' but still have a desk in a friendly research group where I labour, unpaid, writing and researching. However, if people ask me what I do in life, I say that I teach lecturers to teach. Although this takes up little time, it seems to validate my varied past experience, my current place in society and my research work. Hence Lecturer and Action-Learning-Facilitator underpin my other academic attributes. Some aspects of my identity are held in tension: I am Creative yet Rule-based; a Strategist yet Collegiate. These contradictions made my original career in IT challenging, but helped me become a good lecturer in computer science. My skills, experience and strengths supported me as an Action-Researcher and E-Learning-Pioneer but proved of little assistance in my final career move when, in becoming an educational researcher, I effected a 'drastic transition' (Gardner, 2008, p. 344). After several years of uncertainty, I now present myself as an Educational-Researcher and Auto-Ethnographer. There are gaps at the centre of my island, where one might imagine a sickle-shape mountain range. This missing backbone represents the academic qualifications I lack. My current identity also encompasses that of Student as I bundle together my past publications into a coherent

thesis for my PhD by portfolio, hence my PhD lies offshore of my island.

In reviewing this map, I find that it differs in several respects from the author biography I would write for a journal paper such as this. My creative arts credentials, for example, are not specified in my map, perhaps because they are subsumed in it. This leads me to question which of my personas is the more authentic. Monmonier (1991, p. 1) contends that “[n]ot only is it easy to lie with maps, it’s essential” since maps necessitate distortion in order to represent a three-dimensional world in two dimensions. An identity map will distort reality, not through scale or geometry, but, like any socially collected data, through its representation of how the source felt at a point in time. While prolonged observation and close knowledge of a subject will add to the trustworthiness of an analysis (Cousin, 2009), self-knowledge is difficult. This map reveals more than I would like of my insecurities. Ellis and Bochner (2000) would argue that these autoethnographic disclosures open my personal experience to wider understanding. Whether or not this is the case, the map provides a baseline against which to identify future changes in my academic identity.

Research role

The ‘map’ is a three-step strategy which stimulates thinking, gives prominence to the visual and encourages reflection thereby revealing the aspects of life one believes to be relevant to one’s identity. The unpredictability of the visual form provides a “means of discovery” (Harper, 2005, p. 756) of unexpected realities unlikely to have emerged otherwise, examples here included issues of age and legitimacy. While Cousin (2009, p. 214) notes that visual research (such as photograph or other image creation or discussion) is gaining ground in higher education because it elicits “more expressive and emotional responses” than conventional research, this might also discourage its use as might its perceived self-indulgence. According to Klein (2009, p. 173), Perry’s map mixes art therapy, fiction and autobiography, and shows “how a previously chaotic emotional landscape had now become comprehensible and navigable terrain”. Visual metaphors encourage the map author to reveal their beliefs and assumptions in ways that can be rich and self-revelatory (Harper, 2005), for example through what has been included and what omitted, where the content is positioned and how it is clustered. The inclusion of such topographical features as islets and headlands enhances the visual metaphor. Perry drew the mountain ranges in his original artwork but my own was simply implied. Further insight may be derived from the island outline, rather as from an inkblot, as when Perry remarks that his island, perhaps unintentionally, “ended up looking like the two parts of the brain” (Klein 2009, p. 185).

Metaphorical maps remain uncommon in education research. Macfarlane (2012, p. 129) presents a map of the “higher education research archipelago” which provides a focus for discussion of the division of the field into separate camps sharing little common theoretical ground. Macfarlane (2012) notes how his map of research themes and theoreticians, reveals much about himself; however, these personal insights are incidental rather than the purpose of his analysis. An island metaphor evokes the fragmentation of the higher education landscape. In representing academic identity it highlights each individual’s internal separateness which, as some of my student-colleagues chose to show, preserves the potential to form alliances via boats or bridges.

The novel

This vignette demonstrates a metaphorical analysis of my academic identity which reveals political, cultural and social aspects.

Inspiration

I developed this strategy through reflecting on the evolution of a higher education research community which I had co-founded. I came to see our development as a series of phases, each characterized by different attitudes within the group. This insight led me to connect certain novels with the phases through which we had passed. The novels provided the key to an autoethnographic analysis built around the metaphors of the titles and the metaphorical themes of the novels themselves (King, Forthcoming). These metaphors enabled me to draw out themes which I had previously been too close to the data to see clearly. Thus it was the metaphorical lens which I valued, not the plot, writing style or characters within the particular novels I chose. In the analysis below, I adopt this same strategy in order to explore my academic identity by means of an appropriately metaphor-rich novel.

Application

My Brilliant Career (1901/1980) by Miles Franklin (1879-1954) follows Sybylla Melvyn's fairy-tale-like journey to adulthood through cycles of affluence and poverty. I inherited a love of this novel from my mother who valued the Australian outback setting and the young author's engaging style; nonetheless, these are not my focus. The title and the themes I find within the novel provide the means to reflect on aspects of my academic identity. Here I explore two of the most important themes, *adolescence* and *marriage*.

Adolescence

"I only know that I hate this life. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it," (Franklin, 1901/1980, p. 27)

Sybylla hates being poor because it robs her of time to think, read and write, since the brilliant career she envisages for herself is that of author. Her extremes of misery and happiness are adolescent responses which recall my troubled experience of becoming an educational researcher. My role seemed at one moment simple, the next impossibly difficult. I hated my academic life whilst I could not understand my place in it. Threshold concept theory suggests that a learner must pass through a liminal stage in order to gain mastery of difficult (troublesome) disciplinary concepts (Meyer & Land, 2005). The liminal state of having learned but not fully understood has been compared to adolescence in western cultures (Meyer & Land, 2005) in that the adolescent oscillation between child and adult states parallels a learner's oscillation between understanding and lack of understanding. For Sybylla and myself, greater understanding of our context led to a state of relative calm.

Adolescence and threshold liminality are both characterised by “ritualised learning or mimicry” (Meyer & Land, 2005 p. 382). *My Brilliant Career* itself is an adolescent mimicry of an adult novel, its story sandwiched between an introduction and conclusion which speak directly to the reader. My early writing bears traces of mimicry through chunks of quotation rather than critique of established theory. I overcame mimicry once I understood my material.

Marriage

“[Sybylla] is young to mention in regard to marriage, but ... it might be the makings of her if she married early.” (Franklin, 1901/1980, p. 30)

My Brilliant Career explores marriage as a political, social and cultural phenomenon. While her family, neighbours and society at large expect her to marry, Sybylla sees marriage as a stifler of individualism. At times Sybylla is tempted to relinquish her autonomy by marrying and living an easier life. I recognise these tensions between the desire for autonomy and the need to conform to prevailing expectations both in myself and in colleagues who participated in a survey of academic identity (Clouder, Deepwell, & King, 2009).

The novel also reflects my experience in so far as it represents the reactions of one individual to the manoeuvrings of others. First as employee and then as freelance, my host department was repeatedly restructured. These restructurings resulted from the institution’s strategic responses to external change (Clegg, 2008; Henkel, 2000). At one time my role was to build a critical mass of co-researchers within the institution; later to make external research partnerships; later still to build my own profile independently of others. Billot (2010, p. 718) suggests that academics’ identity “is now being challenged by institutional change”. As with Sybylla, each twist of plot, each new episode, necessitated a re-framing of my identity within the new context.

Research role

While Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 125) recommend using works of fiction in “organizing experience, and [to suggest] alternative thematic models” this cannot justify the apparently random selection of a novel and its themes to scaffold the analysis of a research context. Effective use of this strategy depends firstly upon great familiarity with a work of fiction; and secondly upon cycles of reflection on the context, possible novels, possible themes, exemplars from the research context and connections with others’ research. Over time these reflections begin to isolate a novel with themes that can render the familiar ‘strange’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Provided the user’s knowledge of the novel is acute, the reader’s need not be. I first used *My Brilliant Career* in my teaching over twenty years ago when its appeal lay solely in its ironic title. Now I find it rich with metaphoric themes such as *sisterhood* which could illuminate my academic context, though space restricts my analysis in this paper.

Brew (2001, p. 83) contends that “[r]esearch findings are permeated with metaphors” and herself uses extended quotations to assist her reflections on the nature of research. My strategy owes much to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in using metaphor to discern what is meaningful in an experience and to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.

192) who recommend a critical reading of “themes, parallels, and contrasts within literary sources” in constructing an analysis or argument. Isolating themes within a novel distorts its narrative structure such that previously unnoticed phrases, linkages and repetitions become conspicuous. These in turn resonate with features of the research context such as observations, writings or social interactions. By helping me distance myself from my data, these metaphors enhance the depth and usefulness of my analysis. However, a metaphor will “highlight some features of reality and hide others” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 157). Hence analysis must be undertaken with awareness that thematic metaphors could be constrain as well as free reflection.

How does this strategy differ from narrative inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)? I would suggest that narrative inquiry involves making a story out of a life which is then analysed whereas the ‘novel’ takes an existing story to see what analytical light it can throw on a life. While Denzin (2006) among others would assert that this is an oversimplification, it broadly captures my stance.

The grid

In this vignette, I introduce a strategy which visualises themes embedded within the vocabulary of large volumes of electronic communication.

Inspiration

The ‘grid’ combines two different internet-based ways of interpreting large amounts of written material. Researching web-based art to find inspiration for new e-learning resources (King, 2005), I came across TenByTen.org, created by information artist Jonathan Harris which trawls selected news websites hourly to find the hundred most journalistically significant words in current use. The words are placed in a 100-cell grid, with each word illustrated by the image that most commonly accompanies it on the news websites, creating an hourly visual précis of the news. Scrolling back through time reveals the changing global news scene. My second source of inspiration is web-based literary text analysis which automates the analysis of texts individually or gathered together as a corpus (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). Combining text analysis and visual précis allows me to visualise the themes underlying electronic communication.

Application

In order to create a visualisation of email discourse appropriate for display in this paper, I took a month’s-worth of my incoming emails and stored each week as a separate file, creating a mini-corpus of electronic communication. I prepared my data by removing all junk and purely administrative emails, leaving just those from internal and external correspondents who more-or-less represent my virtual community of practice. I also removed all sensitive data such as contact details. I then instructed my selected web-based text analysis software, Voyant (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2012), to ignore standard English ‘stop words’ such as *a*, *and*, *is*, *you* since these would distort my data analysis.

Voyant calculated that my corpus of four files amounted to 17,924 words comprising 3,365 distinct words. It provided a list of distinct words within each file and

within the whole corpus, sequenced by the frequency of word usage. I analysed these results by searching for and visually coding themes of joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). Figure 2 contains a visualisation created from my spreadsheet displayed as a seven by seven grid since the scale suits this journal’s page size and the small data sample better than would ten by ten. For clarity, the cells are numbered to show the comparative frequency of word usage in the underlying data. The three images used, one for each coded theme, disclose aspects of the discourse that would otherwise be difficult to discern. The images used in my coding were gathered in the research context and are therefore meaningful to me. A difficulty arises where a word (such as *practice* which was re-coded from mutual engagement to shared repertoire) spans two or more themes. Similarly, some words may not obviously fit into any theme, the single example here being *time*. Thematic coding should be systematic and justifiable. A contentious example in Figure 2 is the coding of *series*, *online* and *national* all as ‘mutual engagement’, where, perhaps, sub-themes might have been employed to distinguish activities, outputs and contexts.

The five most common words in the corpus (and the number of times they occur) are: *education* (164), *learning* (136), *university* (136), *teaching* (135) and *higher* (124). This core vocabulary, its variants and synonyms encapsulate the joint enterprise of my community of practice. Joint enterprise also covers *students* and *student* which, combined, would make the second most frequent word in the corpus.

Our mutual engagement is revealed in terms of *research*, *development*, *assessment* and *support* through activities such as *conference[s]*, *workshop[s]*, *papers*, and *resources*.

The corpus highlights names of my professional organisations and special interest groups, such as HERDSA. Our collective knowledge of organisations, institutions and individual practitioners (*professor[s]*, *dr[s]*) suggests a shared repertoire which is further evidenced by unusual words in our vocabulary, for example, *practice*.

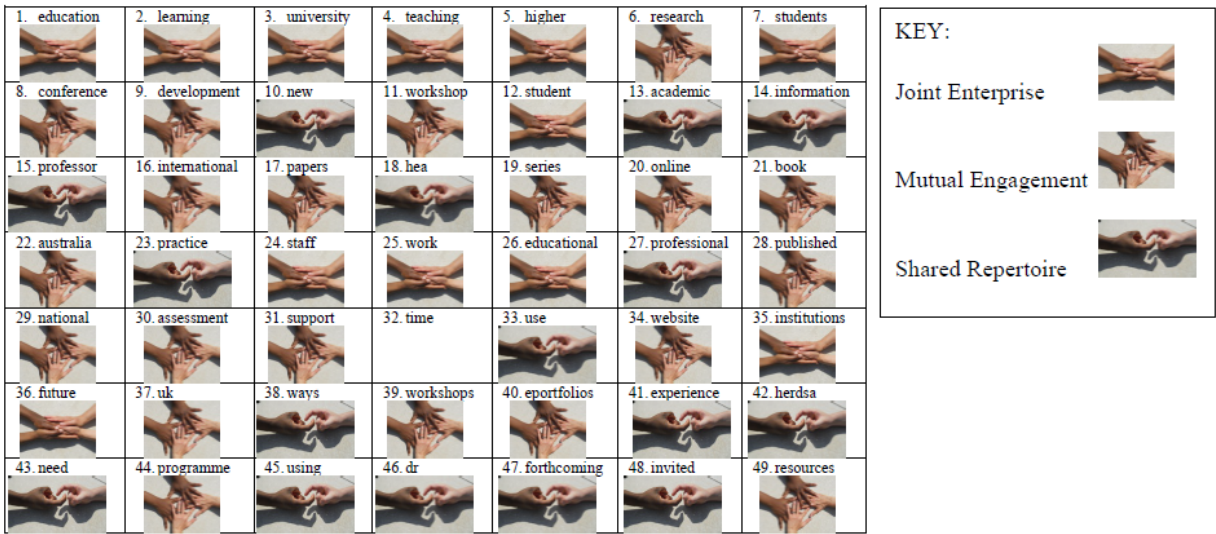


Figure 2. Grid visualising the community of practice themes underlying the most frequently used words in one month’s incoming email

A comparison of the separate weeks' vocabulary reveals similar results to that of the combined corpus of texts. Certain individuals and institutions also appear in particular weeks because of their activities. Nonetheless, the three themes are consistently evident in my email discourse once the data has been visually coded. This would suggest that the grid strategy has potential in assisting the analysis of more complex data and thematic coding.

Research role

The 'grid' is a qualitative strategy with a "numerical dimension" (Cousin, 2009, p. 35) which assists in the visualisation of themes found in my data. This strategy begins with an externalised analysis of discourse which is then personalised by the user through their choice of thematic images and coding decisions. In linking an image to a theme, this strategy resembles other data analysis processes used to identify patterns, for example, in focus group comments (Cousin, 2009). However, the 'grid' uses word-frequency to determine word sequence and sets out to communicate a snapshot of the research context itself through its assemblage of images. The juxtaposition and repetition of theme images create visual impact. Furthermore, by employing authentic theme images, each snapshot becomes a composite that is "both empirical and constructed" (Harper, 2005, p. 748) since it not only evidences but also interprets the research context.

My use of the 'grid' links my individual identity to the wider higher education context since it analyses the discourse of the many individuals and organizations which email me. Unusual vocabulary and frequent word-usage signal a shared discourse which reflection reveals through thematic coding. Visualisation of the frequency of words in a text through 'wordclouds', such as those generated by wordle.net, has proven popular appeal but offers only an approximation of discourse content, while literary text analysis provides detailed insight which requires further analysis. The 'grid' combines these usefully. Morris and Ecclesfield (2011) have discussed a rather similar strategy using knowledge management software to identify and deconstruct the most important themes concealed within large volumes of text. However, their purpose is to automate the analysis process or provide initial direction where data volumes are high or time is short rather than to facilitate reflection as here.

The original TenByTen.org website demonstrated that there is scope for many more than three themes to be illustrated, and that capturing separate snapshots of electronic communication (by the hour, week or other unit) and visually encoding their themes can reveal vocabulary usage trends.

Discussion

I have used three research strategies, the 'map', the 'novel' and the 'grid' to reveal different layers of understanding (Brew, 2001) concerning one individual's academic identity which may disclose more general truths. The 'map' created insights into what I believe to be distinct about my academic persona and what is important in my academic life, and unexpectedly revealed issues of age and legitimacy. The 'novel' tested aspects of threshold concepts and writings on academic strategic change, uncovering my

feelings about my development as a member of the research community and of my organization. The 'grid' examined the discourse of my incoming emails for evidence of communities of practice and revealed the relative frequency of three of its facets. None of these outcomes is the *purpose* of these strategies; they are the result of the way I have chosen to apply them and are indicative of the ways they could be used by others. I will review each in turn against the findings of previous studies into academic identity which relied upon interviews, observation and/or surveys.

The 'map' provides a view of academic identity which is subjective and static yet holistic. In revealing my growing understanding of the interrelationship of teaching, research, discipline and practice which is similar to that of Åkerlind's (2011) subjects, it exposes an identity constructed from the "interplay between the local [my own practice] and the global [higher education at large]" (Wenger, 1998, p. 162). The inclusion of both personal and professional attributes creates the fuller picture of identity found by (Clegg, 2008). While the mapped identity was multifaceted rather than fragmented as Henkel (2000) would lead us to expect, internal tensions in my understanding of my academic role were revealed which echo the findings of Clouder, Deepwell and King (2009). However, the clustering of different attributes within my island disclosed a growing sense of legitimacy which mirrors the social transition of research students (Gardner, 2008) and the "internal, self-based validation" of Åkerlind's (2011, p. 185) established academics.

The 'novel' presents a more-distanced and dynamic view of social and cultural concerns. My choice of novel and metaphors is revealing in itself of the inter-relationship of identity, "thinking and language". Meyer and Land (2005, p. 375). It revealed issues of academic identity which were rooted in the past (Billot, 2010). My difficult experience of becoming an educational researcher parallels the unstructured probation which Smith (2010) explored amongst new lecturers. Our liminal spaces are different but equally troublesome. The repeated need to adapt to organisational change created tensions, echoing the findings of Billot (2010) and Clegg (2008). However, my own values and history as a "distinctive individual" (Henkel, 2000, p. 16) emerge from this analysis.

The 'grid' supplies an externalised analysis of snapshots of discourse which are interpreted according to chosen visual themes. My identity continues to evolve through the language, activities and priorities I share with diverse communities (Wenger, 1998). My incoming emails revealed these social aspects of my academic identity, exposing what (Henkel, 2000, p. 16) called the "embedded individual" and my "professional and practice based loyalties" (Clegg, 2008, p. 340). No sense could be gained of my contribution to my field (Åkerlind, 2011), nor my altruistic desire to support colleagues (Clouder, Deepwell, & King, 2009). For this, analysis of my outgoing emails would be necessary.

My intention in presenting this study of academic identity was to show how these strategies assisted in uncovering the 'strangeness' in one's own identity. Are the results authentic or false? The three strategies help to crystallize each other's findings in ways I could pursue through other means such as document analysis. For example, my claim to be an 'Educational-researcher' in my map is supported by the frequency of related words in my grid. However, I would have to review the underlying emails to establish whether the frequency of '*student/s*' in my grid supports my map claim to be

‘Fond-of-students’. Similarly, the inclusion of ‘Educational-researcher’ and ‘Auto-ethnographer’ in my map supports my ‘novel’ finding that I am emerging from a liminal research state, while further email analysis would be required to establish the extent of the independent research reputation the ‘novel’ suggests. Thus, not only has each of these strategies echoed the findings of other studies using other methods, but each has also helped me create new understandings of myself, and potentially the wider context, through their reflexivity.

My own research inclinations are revealed through my vocabulary. ‘Insight’, ‘understanding’ ‘trustworthiness’ and the use of the first person would have suggested a qualitative, interpretivist tendency even without the use of autoethnography. Qualitative research “embraces tensions” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 6), such as those that arise from the introduction of unfamiliar strategies, and requires the researcher to question familiarity and to look for patterns in the apparently random and the random in the pattern. This is the creative turn which Brew (2001), among others, calls for. These strategies are creative in that they express a research context visually (the ‘map’), metaphorically (the ‘novel’) and thematically (the ‘grid’). Like any reflexive strategy, they must be undertaken with conscious care since each is subjective and will permit particular aspects of the context to be privileged and others excluded (Cousin, 2009). However, because these strategies help to create knowledge, their application will be more than simply “the creation of an artefact such as a painting” Brew (2001, p.171).

Conclusion

In writing this paper, I chose to demonstrate three emergent research strategies through an autoethnographic study because it fitted the scale of this paper; chose to study academic identity because of its relevance to readers of this journal and chose the self-portrait theme because it mirrored my efforts to reveal the public in the personal. “[A]rtists peer at themselves, alternately retreating from the spectator and facing up to him [sic]. The ‘spectator’ is, in each case, both the artist himself *and* you and me” (Friend, 2005, p. 160, [original emphasis]). However, any research strategy, like any painted portrait, will be selective in what it hides and what it explores internally (Harper, 2005).

The diverse field of higher education research (Kandlbinder, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012), continues to favour a limited range of method/ologies (Tight, 2012). Nonetheless, to address qualitative research needs, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) encourage the development of new strategies such as the three presented here,. The reader’s conceptualisation of the field (Oancea, 2005) will determine the extent to which they find these strategies useful. Whether or not these particular strategies gain wider acceptance, methodological inspiration from the creative arts can help us “paint a picture of the universe” (Brew, 2001, p. 135).

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